DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 472 UD 022 455

AUTHOR Li, Gertraude Roth; Johnson, Winston
TITLE Afghans: The Challenge of Sponsorship.
INSTITUTION World Relief Corp., Nyack, NY.
PUB DATE Jun 82
NOTE 11p.; For related documents see UD 022 457-458.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Cultural Background; *Cultural Differences; Females; Foreign Countries; Individual Characteristics; Job Application; Males; North American Culture; *Refugees; Relocation; Social Influences; *Sociocultural Patterns
IDENTIFIERS Afghanistan; *Afghans

ABSTRACT

Provided in this report are descriptions of the sociocultural background of Afghan refugees and other information that may be of use to those involved in sponsoring Afghan refugees in the United States. The report discusses facets of Afghan life and culture, including religion, personal relationships, family structure, and male-female relations; describes differences in Afghan and American lifestyles; and explains Afghan patterns of thinking and behavior that may influence their personal interactions, adjustment to work situations, and ways of dealing with different aspects of life in the United States. The report suggests that American sponsors for Afghan refugees can best deal with adjustment difficulties by understanding Afghan culture and gaining the refugees' trust and friendship. (MJL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED219472

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gertraude R. Li

World Relief Corp

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Afghans:

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

by

Gertraude Roth Li

June 1982

Winston Johnson

Director of Research and Planning

UD 022 455

AFGHANS

The Challenge of Sponsorship

I. Background of the Afghan Refugees

Since 1979 two to three million Afghans have sought refuge in Pakistan. As the conflict between the resistance and the Soviet supported regimes in Kabul continues, more refugees arrive every month. Living mostly in tents provided by relief agencies, the refugees face harsh conditions, especially in the cold winters.

Some of the refugees in the camps are herdsmen, but most are displaced farmers from small villages and towns. A significant proportion of the refugees are women and children whose men were killed by Afghan or Russian troops to prevent them from joining the resistance. Of the men in the camps, many continue to go back to Afghanistan and fight as guerillas in the hope of winning back their country. Afghans are a proud and extremely independent people who have fought off would-be conquerors for many centuries. They feel deeply attached to their country and one may safely assume that nearly all Afghan refugees, wherever they are, hope to return to Afghanistan some day.

The Afghan refugees coming to the U.S. are not farmers and villagers. They are for the most part well-educated city people, many of them with one or more degrees from American or European universities, former government officials, civil servants, teachers, doctors, engineers, businessmen, etc. In Afghanistan their lives were endangered because of their opposition to the Communist governments since 1978, their positions in previous non-Communist governments, or simply because of their education and family connections.

U.S. bound Afghans usually fall into one of several categories: (1) Those who held fairly high level government positions, some of whom may have had family ties to the former royal family; (2) the educated middle class and civil servants unsympathetic to the Communist regime; (3) relatives of active opponents of the regime; and (4) relatives and friends of Afghans already in the U.S. Since 1981, Afghan refugees interested in coming to the United States apply through the offices of the Joint Voluntary Agencies in Karachi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Before the establishment of these offices, they approached U.S. consulates in Pakistan, India, and Germany.

The people of Afghanistan belong to various ethnic groups. The most important of these are the Pushtuns (about 45%) and the Tajiks (about 35%). Both are Indo-European peoples. A smaller number are Hazaras, Turkomans, or Uzbeks, groups of Mongol or Turkish origin. The Pushtuns, who are also the ethnic Afghans, and gave their name to the country, have dominated the nation since 1747. The royal families have been Pushtuns. Each of the ethnic groups is proud of its identity and, like other groups everywhere, tend to

associate when possible with members of their own community. In the U.S., the Afghans' primary loyalties remain. They do not, however, preclude amiable social relationships between members of different ethnic groups.

II. The Afghan Way of Life

Religion: In Afghanistan, Islam is an integral part of the people's lives. This does not mean that all Afghans are orthodox Muslims who go to the mosque on Fridays and pray five times a day as prescribed by their holy scriptures, the Koran. Muslims do not need to have a mosque or a mullah (the equivalent of a priest or minister). They can be devout believers with or without either.

Though devout, Afghans are rarely fanatic about their religion. Because Islam considers the Bible to be a precursor of the Koran, Muslims respect Christians and Jews as "People of the Book" (like themselves). Since the Koran also mentions Jesus and other Biblical figures as well as some Biblical episodes, an Afghan will be comfortable with believers, and may well be interested in learning more about their faith. They are open to discussion and want to know what Christians believe. Their eagerness to ask questions has shocked some sponsors. One Christian hostess remembers that once an Afghan came to her home armed with a list of detailed questions on Christian beliefs and practices.

Do not equate the Afghan's interest in Christianity with a willingness to become Christian. Many Afghans will be deeply offended by any attempt to convert them; their faith is as important to them as yours is to you.

People Orientedness: Most Afghans are enormously social and love to have company. Families are extended and large, and much social life is devoted to enjoying cousins, uncles, aunts, friends, and friends of friends, all of whom visit each other a great deal. In America, this trait is intensified by their sense of isolation in a new country. One sponsor with extensive contacts with Afghans in the U.S. felt that to Afghans, people seemed to be the only source of entertainment. If left alone they would resort to making telephone calls, visiting shops (to see people), or simply taking a nap to pass time until someone appeared for companionship.

In Afghanistan, people do have plenty of other interests. They enjoy sports, the favorites being soccer, hunting, riding sports, kite flying, and others not commonly known in the United States. Because they have little knowledge of American sports, they do not find much enjoyment in them. Similarly, while great lovers of poetry and literature in Afghanistan, Afghans, because of language, are cut off from enjoying most literature and from reading in general. The concentration on socializing as the prime and sometimes only form of entertainment can be a natural result.

Hospitality: For an Afghan, hospitality is one of the most important social values and obligations. No matter who the guest may be, no matter how

unexpectedly they may arrive, guests are treated like kings. Afghans will go hungry to offer their last scrap of food to a guest without ever indicating that they are doing so. The host may also go into debt in order to properly treat his guests and do so even if it means that he has to work for weeks in order to repay the money. Guests are welcome as long as they want to stay and are treated as royally on the last day of their visit as on the first.

Family Structure: When Afghans think of their family, they include grandparents, uncles and aunts, grown brothers and sisters, all in-laws and their families, distant cousins, etc. The family ties between the members of this large group are very close and each person feels responsibility for all members. Be aware that references to "someone in the family" may mean someone who is only distantly related in American terms.

Afghanistan has no welfare system. People in need are taken care of by more fortunate family members. Even distant relatives will not hesitate to take in a needy relative, no matter how distant the relationship may be, and do so without making the person feel the least bit indebted. Since Afghanistan does not have our monetary economy, and food, until 1978, was relatively inexpensive, there has usually been little layout of money involved.

Relations Between the Sexes: Like all Muslim countries, Afghanistan once observed the custom of purdah (wearing of the veil by women). In 1959, this was made optional and many women in Afghanistan's cities have been wearing the latest fashions. Many Afghan women coming to the United States as refugees may never have worn the veil.

Until recently the attitude of the father frequently determined whether a girl would get an education. It is possible that the wife in your refugee family did not have any formal, especially higher, education. The younger generation has had more opportunities. There are more schools now in Afghan cities where women can study. Some educated Afghan women are self-confident and have held jobs, often as teachers and office workers, but the majority of women have not been exposed to life outside their immediate families.

Men and women in Afghan society go their separate ways most of the time and both sexes seem to enjoy themselves better when with their own kind. The man is the undisputed head of the family, but within the home it is the wife (and perhaps the grandmother) who wields authority.

III. Orientation

When we realize that Afghan refugees coming to the U.S. have lost the large, warm family that they were accustomed to being surrounded by, and instead are expected to function in a society where so many activities center around the individual and many people prize their right to privacy, we can sympathize with their desire to live with or near their fellow Afghans in the U.S.

If the Afghan community is large enough to fulfill the social and emotional needs of its members, it may isolate them from the surrounding American society. This does not always help them to adjust to the U.S. For some Afghans who were wealthy, had very high social status, held high government positions, or were closely related to the royal family, the adjustment to a new situation is very difficult. They had large homes and gardens, servants, and in some cases chauffeur-driven cars, travelled to Europe, collected art, and were patrons of music. But even middle class families have a tremendous adjustment to make.

Afghans tend to be proud, self-reliant, and independent. When in need of help in Afghanistan, they could count on the backing of the family. For example, if a man lost his job, the family would help him get reestablished. In the U.S. he may initially have to take work which, in Afghan society, would be humiliating for someone of his education, experience, and status. Yet, there is no family to see him through the crisis here. Since daily life requires a great deal of money, Afghans in America do not have the funds to support non-working relatives.

As a result, for some Afghans, especially in some East Coast communities, welfare seems to fill the gap and fulfill the function of the extended family. Newcomers may be urged to apply for welfare benefits immediately upon arrival. Thus, they do not learn about American attitudes toward those who depend on welfare, and they miss their chance to get started in American life.

Don't plant the idea of welfare in their minds. If they are considering welfare, make them aware that it should be resorted to only in emergencies. Point out that welfare has great disadvantages for the recipient, because it offers no hope for the future, and that a job, even if it pays less than welfare in the beginning, presents opportunities for the future.

Afghans who never consider the welfare alternative, who may never even know about it, generally succeed in getting progressively better jobs. All sponsors should do their own job orientation for their refugees. Make sure your refugees understand that they may not be able to start at the level they held in Afghanistan, but at the same time make it clear that if they start with a humble job, they need not give up hope of moving upward and possibly reaching again their previous level, either in the field they were in or in a new one.

Inform them about the American work ethic, that any kind of honest work wins more respect than being on welfare. Because business has only begun to gain respect in Afghanistan - traditionally it meant money-changing and bazaar shops - educated Afghans may continue to think of the public administrative sector as the only place of employment. Point out that business in the U.S. has prestige and offers many opportunities for advancement in interesting fields. Remember that any advice or counseling that you might provide during your conversations will be more effective when done from man to man and woman to woman.

IV. Adjustment to Life in America

Interpersonal Relationships: Afghans will enjoy meeting and socializing with Americans, although especially in the beginning language and differences in social behavior may lead to certain strains. For example, when Americans meet for the first time, they often talk about the weather, politics, or other impersonal topics to get acquainted. Not exactly an efficient way to get to know someone, the Afghan would think. For Afghans you, the person, are the most important topic. They will not hesitate to ask you where you work, how much you earn, how old you are, whether you are married, how much your dress or suit cost, etc. By asking these questions, Afghans express their interest in you. The newly arrived Afghan is not aware that Americans consider these types of questions not suitable for casual conversation. Do not be offended; explain to them as gently as possible what the American way under such circumstances would be. Once they know the norms of American customs and manners, they will readily adapt and be courteous by American standards.

Impersonal issues, or what we call such, rarely remain impersonal when Afghans discuss them. For example, if someone did not get a job or was not admitted by a school, Afghans will assume that the person in charge did not like the applicant, or that somebody else had a better relationship with that person. Because Afghans personalize so many issues, conflicts can flare up easily. They may be quite easily offended (for not having been invited, not having been talked to, etc.) but being the social people they are, they also make up again easily.

Afghans themselves are very courteous and careful not to offend. Because Afghans would feel ashamed when confronted with a direct "no", they will rarely deny a request directly, and they do not expect others to do it to them. This etiquette can present problems in contacts between Afghans and Americans who are usually direct in their answers. Eventually Afghans learn American ways, but in the beginning you might help your refugees by not humiliating them with a direct negative answer. Try to soften your denial as much as you can.

On the other hand, if you expect an Afghan to do something, you had better find out what kind of commitment is behind his "yes". In the beginning, do not be surprised if you are told yes and nothing happens, or you find out it really meant "no". Explain courteously whether an expectation must be fulfilled ("I will have to leave my office early to meet you, so I have to know whether you can be there at six o'clock.") and then ask for confirmation in a way that will enable the Afghan to explain a "no" if it is necessary.

Work: The private business sector (outside of the bazaars and agriculture) was just beginning to develop in Afghanistan, and for most educated Afghans, the public sector - the civil service, teaching, etc. - was the only source of employment. This explains why so many Afghans in the U.S. want to work for the World Bank, the UN, or lacking that, in other bureaucratic white

collar jobs. Unfortunately, their past experience and lack of proficiency in English often does not qualify them for such jobs.

The ancient, worldwide tradition that the educated man does not work with his hands also handicaps many of them. The jobs they may have to consider are often jobs with a very low social status in Afghanistan - jobs which are associated with uneducated day laborers.

During your common job hunting remember the personal Afghan way of doing things. A job that comes through the impersonal employment agency or the newspaper classifieds will sound less appealing than one that you have heard of through a friend. In fact, the way a job is found can be responsible for an Afghan taking or rejecting it. It will be most useful if you discuss with your refugee every step he has to take to reach his goal, that white collar job he wants. Probably this entails taking any available job first to earn the money to go to the school that will give him the preparation he needs.

Once employed, the Afghan tends to be a very good worker, prompt and reliable. When Afghans try to work out a business relationship with other Afghans, they may not do as well. An excessive amount of maneuvering and backbiting sometimes prevents them from establishing good teamwork.

Similar to the man, the educated woman faces the problem of pride when looking for a job. If she comes from an influential family there are many types of work, especially service jobs, which she will feel are below her. If she has some skills, perhaps typing, she may find a job more easily than her former cabinet minister husband. If that happens, some husbands will feel a tremendous resentment and embarassment; others do not not mind their wives and children taking any kind of jobs as long as they themselves do not need to take a menial job.

Women: If the woman in your Afghan family has never been exposed to any social situations at all, she will probably feel insecure, prefer to stay in her home, and not want to go anywhere without her husband. Show your understanding by not urging her too soon to participate in American society. Not only may the woman feel anxious but her husband might actually see such an attempt as an infringement on his authority over his wife. During the initial period - until the husband has found employment - you can help the wife by finding other Afghan women she can visit. It may also be helpful to introduce her to an American woman of her own age, preferably one with children in the same age group, with whom she can discuss children, household affairs, etc., and begin to feel at ease. Many of the women are experts in knitting and needlework, an interest others could share with them.

Relationships Between Men and Women: One of the greatest social differences that immediately strikes Afghans when they arrive is the free and casual relationships between men and women in all facets of life. Since the norms of behavior are so much freer than those with which they are familiar, they may have difficulty figuring out what the rules are, or even if there are any rules.

In general, Afghan men will be extremely courteous toward American women in any situation. But unmarried men face special difficulties. It may seem to them that there are no rules or taboos, which can lead to problems. If, on the other hand, the Afghan man faced with this relative freedom is too timid and fearful of offending, some young American women may take advantage of his ineptitude and ignorance of social life. More than any other Afghans, it is the young unmarried man who needs advice from a trusted American male friend.

Very few unmarried Afghan women come to the U.S. without families. Being used to the protection of their family circles, and very insecure in venturing into unknown social territory, those who do come alone, and even those who come with family, often undergo a period of extreme loneliness and may be desperately in need of women friends who can help them adjust. Since they have no experience in dating or casual friendships with men, they are likely to be fearful of them and reject any initial efforts to arrange dates. They may be helped along by being included in larger social gatherings.

Afghan concepts of modesty are very different from ours. Afghans avoid nudity and semi-nudity even among members of their own sex. Thus, one new Afghan college student reported that his classmates (in swim trunks) were "half-naked". Many Afghan women may hesitate a long time before going to a public swimming pool.

Food: For Muslims, it is absolutely forbidden to eat pork. Generally, no Afghan wants to eat pork and under no circumstances should they be made to eat it unknowingly. Since they do not know all the names for pork, and do not know which prepared foods may contain pork (e.g. sausages, salamis, etc.), they probably will need some help with the selection of meat. Otherwise they will not know what to reach out for in the supermarket.

Alcoholic beverages may also be a taboo for some Afghans. In some parts of the Koran wine is praised; in others, it is condemned. As a result, some Muslims consider it to be taboo, while others do not.

The Afghan diet includes many rice dishes, often cooked with chicken, lamb, or beef, and a great deal of Afghan bread. Fresh fruits are their favorite desserts. (Note: most Afghans are not fond of rich desserts and may not care much for chocolate).

Like most people, Afghans prefer their own familiar dishes. Perhaps for this reason, or possibly because they fear the presence of pork in unfamiliar dishes, some children may not eat lunch during the school day, and instead come home from school to a hot cooked meal. Some adults may also skip lunch at work for similar reasons.

On the other hand, a few Afghans are so eager to become and act American that they concentrate on "junk food", not realizing that it is, overall, expensive and has low nutritional value. Should you come in contact with the latter eating pattern, help such people realize that their own food, or other types of American foods, are much healthier.

Hospitality: When you visit an Afghan home expect to have an enormous amount of food urged on you. Even when it is not mealtime you will always be offered something to eat or drink. Always accept something, at least a cup of tea, so as not to refuse the host's hospitality entirely. Similarly, always offer Afghans something, at least a cup of tea. Though initially they will say "no, thank you," you are expected to insist; they will then accept.

According to the Afghan concept of hospitality there should be much more food on the table than the guests can possibly eat and everyone should be urged to have second and third portions. The American custom of serving a fixed portion - perhaps one chop per person - is almost an insult to an Afghan who is unfamiliar with American customs. You can easily accomodate your recently arrived Afghan guests by serving a hearty "quantity dish", like a beef stew, and have plenty of rice on the side. Count on having leftovers for the next day.

Illness: In the large Afghan family, someone who is sick receives a great deal of sympathy and attention, and Afghans are likely to want this when they are ill. Whereas an American who is sick might not want to be bothered with company, Afghans will welcome visitors - the more the better. If an Afghan becomes ill when staying in your home, you can comfort him or her (and speed up recovery) by popping in frequently to exchange a few words.

Time: In contrast to our daily life which is dominated by the clock, punctuality is not part of the Afghan lifestyle. An appointment at 10:00 am. for example, means only that one should arrive sometime in the morning. You will need to educate your Afghan refugees on the importance of keeping appointments in this country.

V. The Challenge of Sponsorship

The differences between the American and Afghan ways of life are great. Though misunderstandings between you and your refugee (family) may occasionally lead to some difficulties, the burden of adjustment is upon the refugee. The process will be gradual and take time, but you can participate through understanding and help with advice. Pride is the hallmark of the Afghan, and for proud men and women it is difficult and humiliating to ask for help. Offer advice, don't make them ask for it.

When you explain American patterns that they must learn, do not do so in terms of good and bad, superior and inferior ways of doing things. Remember that they are simply different. Every society has its own ways and there are advantages and disadvantages to each. People who have lost their homeland are likely to cling to familiar habits for reassurance.

When you find some of your refugee's views dramatically opposed to American ways, you do not help them by saying, "You'd better change your mind right

away." LISTEN AND DO NOT JUDGE. Try to think how their behavior might translate into our culture. Through an open mind and understanding you can win your refugees' trust, without which they will not be able to do their listening and will judge by their standards.

By establishing a trusted relationship with your Afghan refugee, you have the opportunity to form a deep friendship which, by itself, can be a tremendously rewarding experience. Afghans cherish and honor friendship: when you have an Afghan friend, you have a friend for life.